

## **HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF ALWARTHIRUNAGARI IN THOOTHUKUDI DISTRICT**

**Muthu Santhana Kumar and P. Basith Assarani**

*Department of History,  
Islamiah College(Autonomous), Vaniyambadi - 635 752,  
Tirupattur Dt, Tamilnadu, India  
(Affiliated to Thiruvalluvar University, Serkkadu,632115,  
Vellore (D.T), Tamil Nadu)*

### **Abstract**

Alwarthirunagari is situated in the southern corner of Tamil Nadu in India. It is one of the ancient town in South India and situated between the two ancient seaports of Ancient Tamilagam, Korkai and Adichanallur in the direction of south east and north respectively. It is familiar Vaishnavite centre in Southern India from Ancient period. A plenty of ancient monuments and remains were found here and nearby of this town during the excavations was carried out by Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). It was under the administrative division of Tirunelveli for a long period and now it was annexed with Thoothukudi district, at the time of bifurcation of Thoothukudi from Tirunelveli. It is the taluk head quarter under the district administration of Thoothukudi. Alwarthirunagari have its glorious past history from the prehistoric time onwards. The history of this place can traced from the pre-historic times through the remains were discovered by the excavations took place in this town. This town gained its popularity by Vaishnavism throughout India but apart from Vaishnavism it has a lot of historical importance within it. The works of Bishop Caldwell, G. H. Bate and other foreign accounts were speaking a lot about the glorious past of this town.

**Keywords:** Alwarthirunagari, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Adhinathan Temple, Vaishnavism, Nammalvar, Kurugur, Kurugoor, Thenkarai, Kulothunga I, Muhammed Yousuf Khan, Khan Sahib, Regional History.



## **Introduction**

Alwarthirunagari town is situated in modern Thoothukudi district of southern Tamil Nadu and familiar for its Vaishnava Cult. Buddhism, Jainism and Saivism were also practiced in this town. It is located in the south-east of Tirunelveli and south-west of Thoothukudi [1] and lies on the highway between Tiruchendur and Tirunelveli. The southern railway line from Tirunelveli to Tiruchendur passes through this town and the Railway station is also functioning here. The Buddhism and Jainism were evacuated from this land slowly. But the idols of Buddha found in this region during excavations. It is believed to be the largest town in southern India during the times of Pandyas and was fertile. The biggest annual cattle-fair held here at the banks of the river Thamirabarani coincide with the Vaikasi festival from the ancient past [2]. It was the shuttlecock between the Dutch and British during 17<sup>th</sup> century. It might be one among the trade posts situated between the two ancient sea ports Korkai and Adichanallur. Ancient burial urns were found here [3]. The available sources said that the Dutch established their trading post here. It is confluence of all religions like, Vaishnavism, Saivism, Christians and Muslims etc., from time immemorial. Plenty of historical documents are speaking about the religious importance of this town, but only a meagre amount of records only speaks about the historical importance of this town. The purpose of this paper is an attempt to carve out the outline history and other importance of this town, which are diminishing in the flow of history.

## **Etymology**

The name 'Alwarthirunagari' is the combination of the two words 'Alwar' and 'Thirunagari', 'Alwar' denoted the Nammalvar and 'Thiru' means honour 'nagari' means the people. Sometimes it was referred as 'Thenkarai' in some of the historical records and inscriptions, which means south bank. It is situated in the southern bank of the river Thamirabarani and frequently was flooded.

## **Ancient Period**

The puranas and oral history brings the history of this town to before the birth of Christ that leads to two thousand years ago, but the written records are available to construct the history from eighth century onwards. Ancient burial urns have been found at Alwarthirunagari and its surrounding areas like Alagiyamanavalapuram, Malavarayanattam, Tirukkalur, Thentirupperai, Poraiyur, Angamangalam, Sugantalai, Nallur, Kayalpatinam and Virapandiyanpatinam by Archaeologists through excavations from 1899 to 1906 and 1914. The artefacts excavated in these areas were red and black pottery wares of various dimensions, Iron weapons, skulls etc. The Arabians



had a trade contact with this town before Marco polo. The coins belong to Islamic countries were also found here and most of them belongs to Arabians. All these coins were found very near proximity of Alwarthirunagari nearby Thenthirupperai, which belong to 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Ancient texts sometimes refers the community of vessel (Kappalkara Jaathiyar) as Usilampadiyar, might be the derivation of the term Muslimpadiyar. Arab traders on board in a Vessel is depicted at the Vishnu temple in Alwarthirunagari shows that they have a cordial relationship with the foreigners from time immemorial. 14 important inscriptions were found in this town which contains the political and endowments information about various kings [4]. A sizable Muslim and Christian population are also living here even today with Mosques, Dargahs and Church. Most of the mosques were constructed in this region with stones and depicted Dravidian style of Architecture. The same Dravidian Architectural style was followed in Adhinathan temple at Alwarthirunagari. Muslims are served as a mahouts and kavadi for a generation in Athinathar Alwar temple at Alwarthirunagari [5].

Krishnadasa Kaviraja mentioned in his work Chaitanya Charithamrita that, the famous Vaishnava saint Chaitanya of Bengal visited the Nammalvar temple in this town during his pilgrimage in Southern India between April, 1510 and January 1512. An ancient choultry named as Govindappayyan choultry built by stone was existed was administered by the local board [6] not knowing its history. It was ruled by Pandyas, Madurai Sultanates, Vijayanagras [7], Mughals, Portuguese, Carnatic Nawab's and the British.

## **Temple Architecture**

### **Sri Adhinathar Temple**

Sri Adhinathar temple is ancient one and situated in the middle of this town. The town might be established around the temple. The temple is decorated with the colourful paintings, grand structure of architecture, exquisite sculpture and Mandapas with carved pillars. Most of the sculptures in temples at Alwarthirunagari was carved out of stone and depicted the Dravidian style of Architecture. In Adhinathan temple, the pillars at hall near the sanctum is decorated with the sculptures of saints and sages. The pillars at hall near the Gopuram is decorated with the beautiful designs along with the sculptures.

The endowments and renovation works of Pandyas, Cholas, Rayas, and Nayaks are engraved in the inscriptions of this temple. The stalapurana of this temple is engraved in the southern side of the wall.

Sri Kurugur Nangai Mutharamman temple situated here is also ancient one. Thiruvengadamudaiyan temple, Thiruvaranganathan temple, Pillai Logachariyar, Azhagar, Desikar and Andal temple, Udaiyavar temple, Uyankondan temple, Periya Nambi temple, Krishnan temple, Thirukachi Nambi temple, Kurathazvan temple are the other temples situated in this town.



### **Inscriptions**

Inscriptions of the Kumudam in Adinathan temple mention the name of this town as Thirukurugur in Thiruvazuthi Valanadu [8]. The inscriptions here can be dated from 1215 A.D. Most of the inscriptions are referred the name of the Pandya king 'Maravarman Sundara Pandyan' and mentioned the endowment of the temple land towards the worship of Thiru Nadudaya Piran or Polindu Nindra Piran. Inscriptions belongs to Pandyas, Cholas, Rayas and Nayaks were also found in the northern side of the temple wall of Adinatha temple at Alwarthirunagari. The inscription dated on 1252 A.D refer the name of the king Kulothunga I. The Inscription of the fourth year of Kulasekara Devar in 1272 A.D, praises him as "Sri Ko Maravarman Thirubhuvana Chakravarthi Sri Kulasekara Devar".

### **Stone Nadhaswaram**

Nadhaswaram is a traditional musical instrument generally made out of wood but Nadhaswaram is found here was made out of stone. This stone made Carnatic vocal musical instrument called as Nadhaswaram in Adinathan temple at Alwarthirunagari. It is a standing example for the artistic skilled work of the artisans of ancient Tamilagam. The history of this stone vocal musical instrument is not mentioned. Only two such stone made musical instruments were found in Tamil Nadu. The another one is found in Adi Kumbeshwarar temple in Kumbakonam. The size of this musical instrument is 1 and  $\frac{1}{4}$  feet length (1 feet length upper part,  $\frac{1}{4}$  feet lower part), and 1-inch breadth. A copper sleeve is attached in the lower side of this Nadhaswaram. It is called as 'moha veena' and Donated by the Nayaka ruler Krishnappa Nayak before 350 years. This musical instrument was played while performing the classical dance Bharatham during the raapathu and the pagal pathu utsavam [9].

### **Musical Stone Pillars**

Musical pillars are found in South Indian Architecture. Suchindaram Thanumalayan temple at Kanyakumari district, the Nellaiappar temple in Tirunelveli and the Polinthunindrapiran temple in Alwarthirunagari have such musical pillars in Tamil Nadu. The musical stone pillar is situated in Polinthunindrapiran temple at Alwarthirunagari, which produces the seven ragas sa, re, ga, ma, pa, tha, ne, while tapping the pillars.

### **Drawings**

The Adhinatha temple is decorated with the colourful drawings depicted the story of Ramayana. A faded mural in this temple depicted Nammalvar, Nathamuni, scenes from Ramanuja's life and shown Vishnu is embracing Madura Kavi Alvar. The accompanying Tamil inscription with this mural states that the Lord of Vaikunta teaches Madura Kavi



upadesham here [10].

### **Medieval and Modern period**

Dr. L. A. Prins sent the pages from Bishop Caldwell's work to *The Journal of the Dutch Burger Union of Ceylon*, Galle in Sri Lanka, which was published in Volume IX, Part IV, page No.137, in the year 1917, mentioned that the Dutch captured Thoothukudi from Portuguese in 1658 and set up factories at Vembar, Vaippor, Punnaikayal, Palayakayal, Manappad and Cape Comorin and made Alwarthirunagari was also one of their interior trading out-station for warehouse purpose to store textiles, but they did not exercised any civil jurisdiction over the inhabitants [11]. Markus Paulus Maria Vink mentioned in his work Cross-cultural Contacts that the Dutch Pepper sold at Alwarthirunagari for 23 rix-dollars [12] per pahar [13] in the year 1680. Dutch records in this period deals with the meagre information about the places of this region.

During the time of trade rivalry with British, the Dutch made a secret alliance with the poligars and the King of Travancore against British in 1760 and a large number of Dutch forces with field Guns from Batavia landed and despatched to Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli sea coast and they captured Manapad. After capturing Manapad, Dutch troops marched towards the inlands and stationed at Alwarthirunagari. Muhammad Yusuf Khan, the employee of British East India Company asked the explanation for their action from Dutch chief at Tuticorin, but nothing explained from Dutch side. Muhammad Yusuf Khan appeared before them with his troops and in the same night the total Dutch army vacated from Indian sea shore silently. Thus Muhammad Yusuf Khan saved the people and ancient temples of Alwarthirunagari from the ravages of Dutch invasion and who was hanged to death by British in the year 1764 [14]. According to the oral history the only surviving son of Mohammed Yusuf Khan was taken to Alwarthirunagari after his death. The town which was saved by Muhammad Yusuf Khan became shelter for the life of his only surviving son. His decedents migrated to Palayamkottai afterwards.

By terms of the treaty of 1783 with British in European soil, Dutch restored this town till 1785. After a decade, again the British recaptured the trading outstation in Alwarthirunagari and retained with them till 1818. In between Captain Hamilton was appointed as a commander of the military station here by Nawab in the year 1793. "Ambaldan Chavadi", a commercial complex was existed in the eastern side of the town was the derivation of the name of this captain Hamilton [15], now the place is called as Ambattan Chavadi by locals. Sivasubramanya Pillay, the employee of Kattabomman was charged as he plundered Alwarthirunagari and Srivaikuntam on the night of the 30th January 1798 [16]. Kattabomman was asked to send the enquiry report about the dacoits act of his employ by Jackson [17]. The Dutch made another failed attempt to recapture their trading outstation during the last poligar wars in the year 1801 formed an alliance with, Kattabomman and the ruler of Travancore [18]. Alwarthirunagari was the head quarter of this taluk and lost its status in the year 1838.



Father of Nazareth, Arthur Margoschis visited Alwarthirunagari from 1876 to 1877. He reached Alwarthirunagari from Palayamkottai about 8 p.m in the evening. He was affectionately welcomed by the peoples of Alwarthirunagari regardless of caste and religion. Brahmins and Sudras were also met Margoschis and honoured him with torches and tom-toms, and by bringing temple elephant decorated with howdahs and organised a procession to the east of this town [19]. The following passage from the Church Bells shows that Christianity was also vogue in this town:

*“Nearly every day a party of three or four of them go together to the bank of the river at Alvar-Tirunagari, and there in the dusk of the evening they join together in prayer .... The following is another noteworthy passage in the Bishop’s report: You will remember Jothiyanayagam Pillai of Alvar-Tirunagari. Long before he was baptized, he organized a Sunday class in connexion with his day-school. His Brahman and Vellala pupils attended the Sunday class, and Jothiyanayagam himself instructed them in Christianity, At that time he had no official connexion with the Mission, and the Sunday school he organized was purely his own idea. God has called him away to Himself, but the seed sown in the hearts of his forty pupils has remained. All the boys and young men who were instructed by Jothiyanayagam have learnt the custom of offering private prayer”* [20].

During the time of freedom struggle V.O.C, Subramaniya Bharathi etc., were inspired the masses of the peoples of Alwarthinagari. D. Nellaiappan Chettiyar, V. Nelliappa Chettiyar, M.A. Iyemperumal, T. Maharaposhanam, N. Chinnakannu Nadar, K. Ponniah, A. Thayammal [21] were the eminent personalities actively took part in our freedom struggle and some of them were undergone a rigorous imprisonment by the British. K. Ponniah involved in the W. Loane’s Murder case otherwise called as Kulasekarapattinam episode.

## **Conclusion**

The history of Alwarthirunagari is diminishing in the flow of ages and the scholars and researchers should come forward to dig the real history and document it in a proper way for their future generations. The Captain Hamilton complex in this place changed as Ambaldan Chavadi, Ambattan Chavadi and now it was vanished and the oral history only lives. The recent oral history among the Muslims says that all Muslims in this town were converted from the cast Mudaliar and for instance there is a complex bearing the name Vengu Mudaliar and there is no Mudaliar population here now. some of the Muslim saint’s memorial places are also here and the street named as thaikka street is also situated here. The Muslims in this area had a business with SriLanka from time immemorial and the lost their economic wealth due to the outburst of ethnic problem in SriLanka. Jainism and Buddhism was also vanished from here but the Buddha statue was found and now preserved in Alwarthirunagari temple. So the young scholars and researchers should concentrate on the regional history for the sake of their future



generation.

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